

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

**The Hospitality of Abraham**

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Trinity Sunday, 18 May 2009

*Gen 18:1-8; Song of the Three APB p.399; 2 Cor 13:11-13; Jn 1:1-10*

*This sermon has an accompanying set of images as Microsoft Powerpoint presentation – the references to [slides xx] refer to slides in that presentation.*

As you may have gathered, the reason for all this electronic paraphernalia is because today I'll mainly be talking about an icon. As an icon is inherently a visual thing, I thought it would be helpful to have some visual aids. The whole thing is an experiment though – so please give feedback. Also, if you can't see very well please feel free to move forward, and you should have your own copy of the icon with your pewsheets too.

[Slide 1] *This image was downloaded from*

*[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/17/Andrej\\_Rubl%C3%ABv\\_001.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/17/Andrej_Rubl%C3%ABv_001.jpg)*

As you decide what you want to do, let me try and explain why I am doing this icon thing in a sermon, and why I chose today. Well, one reason is that a few months ago I remember talking with someone here at church and I vaguely recall saying that I thought we didn't make much use of our rich visual church heritage in our worship or reflection, and that this was a real pity because a lot of it is really helpful.

This got me thinking about when might be a good time to remedy this. And I quickly thought of Trinity Sunday because this is the day when I understand that preachers are encouraged to talk not so much about events in Scripture, but about one of the Church's key doctrines, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. (If you have any doubts about the centrality of this have a quick look at what the first article of the Anglican Church is on p. 476 of your prayer books!)

We don't talk directly very much about doctrines these days. In part I suspect this is because the word maybe has a slightly negative flavour for some people. Certainly calling someone 'doctrinaire' is, rightly, not a usually meant as compliment ... And it is also true that used badly, doctrines can be used as way of either over-complicating things, or conversely and maybe worse, dumbing important things down by over simplifying them. Doctrines can be, and have been, used as instruments of exclusion, oppression, schism and even wars.

All that said, I remain a strong fan of good doctrines. They are important in helping to explain, correct, and clarify things. Really good doctrines take us further. My current favourite metaphor is that a really good doctrine is like a key. It will usually be easy to state, but take a lifetime to understand as it takes us in ever deeper. It will often have a somewhat paradoxical twist that makes us think. A good doctrine should help us to gain new perspectives on old stories, to unlock puzzles, and to open new and unexpected inner doors. Over time, a good doctrine should move from a head-based understanding towards a heart based one.

And in all of this, visual stuff, well done, can be very helpful, especially to visual people. Today's icon is called "The Hospitality of Abraham". It is very famous in the Orthodox East and is even fairly famous in the West where it is sometimes called "The Old Testament Trinity".

I first came across it a few years ago when reading a wonderful little book by Rowan Williams, the current Archbishop of Canterbury. (So in case you are wondering, this stuff is kosher for us Anglicans!) The rest of my talk today will draw heavily from Rowan Williams'

insights and even words – so that may account for some of the tone and cadences ... and any real wisdom! If you find anything today interesting or useful for you in this, I'd strongly recommend tracking down the book.

Before coming across this book I have to say that icons hadn't done much for me. Maybe I had a slight Protestant inner raised eyebrow about the use of graven images in churches. But it is much more likely that they just seemed alien. Maybe they were pretty in an exotic and fairly incomprehensible Eastern way, but surely they weren't of much use when compared with clearer and better executed Western art ... ?

Well, needless to say, I was in for a surprise on many counts. One of the things Rowan Williams explains simply but very well is how and why the Eastern church ended up with a precise theology, well grounded in Scripture on when to use and not use images. For example, the Orthodox churches do allow Jesus to be drawn but this is because he was incarnate in the world as a man. But they do not allowed pictures of God the father or the Holy Spirit.

By contrast the Catholic church, in my view unwisely, did allow these kinds of things in the West and so we have ended up with lots of depictions of God the Father as an old man with a beard, supporting a swooning Jesus, with a dove hovering in the background.

[Slide 2] *Here are two examples, both being famous paintings by the Spanish painters El Greco and Velazquez. Although well executed as paintings with some interesting ideas, I find the theology in both to very unsatisfying. They are two ways of how NOT to depict the Trinity, in my book!*

I suspect that one of the unfortunate side effects of these kinds of western images has been to leave many people with a subconscious notion that God really is a rather remote and not terribly attractive authority figure (look at the balding Father in the Velazquez one!). This is both limiting for us, and causes problems in talking to others about God. Brian McKinlay told me an amusing story a couple of weeks ago about one of the feminist theologians he had been studying who had said when reflecting on this kind of thing in Western Art that “my God is bigger than two men and a bird.” ☺ Indeed.

So does this mean that the Trinity can never be depicted? In a sense yes. There can be no way of showing the life of God ‘in itself’. But there is in today's icon a vehicle for some kind of representation of the mystery.

[slide 3]

It takes as its cue today's Old Testament story from Genesis 18 about three angels who visited Abraham by the oaks of Mamre. From the earliest times Christians had started poring through the Old Testament to see whether and how the Christian vision might have been pre-figured. They didn't have to look far into Genesis to find very early on a story where “the Lord” clearly appears as three beings but sharing one common agency.

So people started creating icons of this story. Initially, the narrative was very much in evidence. But as the icon gradually evolved over centuries, the details receded and the painters concentrated on the three figures. Originally set side by side, identically dressed, they later started to be arranged around a table, and differentiated. Today's icon is the classical model and was painted by a Russian, Andrei Rublev in the Fifteenth Century.

Although it is probably the most abstract version, there are links back to the old narrative like the tree and the portico of a house.

[slide 3 transition effect]

It is very important to the interpretation of the story that it shows three agents acting as one – not a sort of divine drama with three different characters. Sometimes discussions of the Trinity (and indeed those Western images) can seem like we are looking at three ‘personalities’ collaborating on a project. It is good to be reminded forcefully that all God does is done by the whole Trinity equally, and that to talk of three divine persons must not mislead us into thinking of human patterns of relationship and cooperation.

That said, Rublev and others give us one unmistakable signal that the arrangement of the figures is significant.

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The central angel wears a tunic of dark red and a blue mantle. This is the way Christ is almost invariably dressed in Eastern art. And there is also a convention that understands that an icon is to be read from left to right as pointing to the Father, the Son and the Spirit.

Again, we need to note that these are set as angels deliberately so they are not taken as simple depictions of Trinitarian persons. But by dressing the middle angel in Christ’s robe, the icon does give us a teaching that the central or pivotal thing in our understanding of the Trinity is Jesus Christ incarnate. This is the figure around whom the composition turns. Our eyes are drawn first to this more boldly coloured focus, the hand extended over a chalice on the table.

[slide 5]

But the inclination of this central figure’s head, and the direction of the eyes turns us towards the figure on the left; and the curving line of the composition leads us to the third figure whose posture echoes the central figure’s inclination towards the angel on the left.

[slide 6]

In icons we learn a great deal from following where the hands and eyes lead us. In this image, there is, quite simply, no place to stop. The movement circles around and around.

[slide 6 transition effect]

It is impossible to stand and look any of the figures in the eye. No full-face contact is possible. And immediately this says something crucial for our understanding of both Jesus and the Holy Trinity. To look at Jesus is not to enter into a simple one-to-one relation. It is right to think of Jesus as my personal Lord and Saviour, to express that in terms of loving devotion. But we do need to be careful not to stop there. We must never lose sight of the fact that the thrust, the direction of all Jesus is and does and suffers is towards the Father from whom he comes.

So the Trinity is never an object (or a trio of objects!) at a safe distance. Knowing the Trinity is to be drawn into in the circling movement: drawn by the Son towards the Father. Drawn into the Father’s breathing out of the Spirit so that the Son’s life may again be made real. It is where contemplation and action become inseparable.

On a personal note, I have to say that I find Rowan Williams’ insights, and my own response to them, not only beautiful and enriching at many levels, but also quite useful. As I have become more accustomed to this way of thinking, I have found that this model for a ‘trinitarian’ way of looking at life embedded in all sorts of situations.

For example, when you have an idea, what do you want to do with it? If you are like me, you normally can’t help but wanting to give it expression, often by saying it internally, or out loud. But once your word has been spoken what does your word itself do? Of course your word

simply embodies and points back to your idea – which is why the word came into existence. And then, of course, the expression of the idea always takes place in a context; and it is the act of speaking that brings an idea and word to life. The manner in which it is expressed is the way an idea and a word become linked. Pick the wrong word, or say it badly and the meaning changes. So in another sense, performance is everything and needs to have a sense that looks back to origins and forward to expression.

In one sense we can sensibly talk about three things happening : we have an idea, we express it, and then the result appears in the form of a word. But in practice this also all happens as one living event, one living reality. We know when we hear a perfect performance or a perfect truth. We know it not just because the words or music were right, but because the ideas they expressed were beautiful, and their expression was an act of skill and of love.

What were those opening words of St John’s gospel again? : “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Sort of sounds like the movements in our icon of the Trinity to me ...

It’s the coming together of the Word, its cause, and its expression that create existence which is always something happening in the present moment, but which is also always a piece and a glimpse into a timeless eternity.

On that topic of eternity, it is also worth noting that one reason why many icons look alien to us, is that their perspective goes against our cultural training. Since the Renaissance in the 1400 we have become accustomed to look for a perspective that looks ‘real’ in the sense of looking out of a window in which things further away look smaller and parallel lines converge at a so-called vanishing point.

[slide 7]

In icons the perspective is often reversed. We are at the vanishing point and things get bigger as you look in. If you spend enough time with this icon you can almost feel as if you are falling into it.

[slide 8]

The colours, the circular motion of the gestures of the figures. The quality of the light, those golden wings ... Maybe we are looking into eternity. Or maybe better, perhaps eternity is looking out at us. Or maybe even better still, both is happening and it is in the interaction that the final chapter of the Trinity story plays out.

[slide 9]

Look where the middle angel’s fingers are pointing. We are being invited to participate and being shown how. This icon is called “The Hospitality of Abraham” which maybe also suggests that one way we participate in the fullness of God is by providing hospitality to the Trinity, who in turn are then able to offer divine hospitality to us.

[slide 10]

It has often been said of this icon that the empty place at the table is for us; there is, so to speak, a fourth seat at the front which completes the picture and this where we observers are. But it is not literally a place from which we can look objectively at something called the Trinity because our eyes (and hearts) cannot but move with the movement of the figures.

Let me finish with another quote from Archbishop Rowan : “The doctrines of Christ and the Trinity can seem remarkably remote and theoretical to most people these days. What we seem to forget is that they were designed in order not only to tell us the truth about God but to make

us live that truth. They are *invitations*, ways of passing on Jesus' invitation to be changed, to repent and trust him, to walk with him.”

And with that, may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all ever more. Amen.